COMMERCIAL FISHER KEEPS FISHING DESPITE BEING PAID $210,000 TO STOP

MICHAEL ATKIN, REPORTER: For the first time in years, the barramundi are coming back.

NATHAN JOHNSTON, RECREATIONAL FISHER: Let's hope we get some fishing done. This is the Fitzroy River and it is the new barra capital of Australia.

MICHAEL ATKIN: Just over a year ago, the problem of overfishing in central and far north Queensland was so bad the state Labor Government banned commercial netting in some areas.

NATHAN JOHNSTON: There was about 100 ton of barra taken out of this system every year before the net-free zones were put in.

MICHAEL ATKIN: Are the early signs good? Do you think the fishing is getting better?

NATHAN JOHNSTON: The early signs are really promising here. We are seeing more people catch better-sized fish.

MICHAEL ATKIN: The net-free zones are also aimed at protecting dolphins, turtles and dugongs.

FISHERMAN: We're fortunate enough to have a local pod of dugongs which I actually have seen myself on several occasions. We've seen a pod with a baby dugong in, which is always good to see.

JIM HIGGS, WORLD WILDLIFE FUND: You know, they have to be recovering because if they get worse, it's a major disaster. Dugongs are one of the key values of the initial listing in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage area so they are a fundamental part of the values.

MICHAEL ATKIN: Hello? My name's Michael, I'm from ABC TV's 7.30 program.

WALLY KEATING, COMMERCIAL FISHER: Oh yeah?

MICHAEL ATKIN: Just wanted to have a chat with you about fishing licence buybacks if that alright?

WALLY KEATING: Why are you so interested in the buyback?

MICHAEL ATKIN: Fishermen were paid a total of $6 million to buy back their commercial licences. But did they really take their money and go?

LEN MONDON, RECREATIONAL FISHER: The majority are out there fishing and that is the taxpayers' money so that is not right.

MICHAEL ATKIN: Do you believe that taxpayer money has just been wasted?

LEN MONDON: It's wasting, totally wasted, yeah.
MICHAEL ATKIN: Len Mondon is a recreational fisherman. He says many commercial fishers have received buybacks and moved to new fishing grounds, including Mackay fisherman Wally Keating.

LEN MONDON: The problem is he has got 200 grand in his pocket, Queensland taxpayers' money in his pocket, and he hasn't lost a day's fishing and he is still out there fishing and richer for it. I mean, I can't see how anybody can justify that, I can't.

MICHAEL ATKIN: Furious locals have told 7.30 Wally Keating continues to fish these waters, despite being paid by the taxpayer to forfeit his commercial licence. He has recently repainted his boat with the letters, "FXHX", which is the commercial licence of his son, Darren.

WALLY KEATING: Yeah, because that's - that's their - what does a bloke at 76 do when he can still work? I can't get a job. I'm probably as sharp as the next guy fishing, but you know, I find out when I've got a hand of 600m that it really knocks me around but I'm still stupid enough to do it.

MICHAEL ATKIN: But you continue to fish, that is a major loophole in the system.

WALLY KEATING: See, it's a free enterprise system, there's no use screaming about it. They dodge all the laws all the time. I'm probably saying the wrong thing here.

JIM HIGGS: We don't have quotas in place that lock in how much each licence can be used. So this - a fisherman that has been bought out can go and lease a licence tomorrow and fish as hard or harder as what they fished before they were bought out and that's not good for the environment and it's also not good for the fishing industry.

WALLY KEATING: Nets in there, nets in here. I would have 50 - 50 pieces of net, you know. 50 pieces of net at 1,000 bucks a net. You know, there's 50,000, that's what they're worth. And there they are. So why can't I keep fishing? I've got to keep fishing.

MICHAEL ATKIN: Wally Keating says after 50 years in the business, he should have been paid more by the Queensland government to retire.

WALLY KEATING: Well, that's where they go wrong all the time, you know, I wouldn't be in this game if I had all me gear taken off me. I should have got something like $500,000.

MICHAEL ATKIN: Len Mondon alleges Wally Keating has also been breaking the law by fishing at the same time as his son.

LEN MONDON: It's definitely illegal. It should be one per licence and that one licence fishing at any one time.

MICHAEL ATKIN: How do you know that's happening?

LEN MONDON: Well, because I got a phone call about a month ago, there was one certain bloke netting in Sarina and the owner of the licence was netting at St Lawrence. It was a distance of 200km plus kilometres, so too far for the police to police that.

WALLY KEATING: That is a lie. I'm looking you in the eye and I would not go in the game to do it, mate. See they don't know, why don't these people, gutless bastards, come here and say this to me.
MICHAEL ATKIN: He believes the net-free zones have failed by shifting the overfishing to new areas. How badly overfished is this area?

WALLY KEATING: I've been three times in the last month - I haven't caught 60kg of fish. I got 115kg of shark trunks, and the fish I could show you in the two plastic bags I've got on there. It's bad out there.

DAVE SWINDELLS, COMMERCIAL FISHER: I have not been able to earn as much money as I did when I would go out netting.

In Rockhampton, Dave Swindells has stopped net fishing following the ban. He was paid $180,000 for his licence.

DAVE SWINDELLS: They said I can go and fish elsewhere but everywhere else I can there is another fisherman there already so I then decide to go and try and catch Spanish mackerel, unfortunately there wasn't enough of them around to supplement my income. So at the moment, myself and all the other net fishermen that were here, they actually lived off the money they've been given when the licences were bought back.

MICHAEL ATKIN: After 15 years on the Fitzroy River he is trying to survive by catching mud crabs.

DAVE SWINDELLS: I pulled up on this pod, I believe there's about nine female crabs and four males, so I'm throwing the females away, and now going to proceed to get out the legal male, look at him, I can obviously see he is not big enough. So he'll go back for another day.

MICHAEL ATKIN: In a statement, the fisheries minister Bill Byrne refused to comment on individual cases, but defended the licence buyback, saying it had reduced the number of fishing boats in operation. But Len Mondon is not convinced.

LEN MONDON: There's that many loopholes in that bloody fishing buyback, it's got more holes than a sieve in it, it's just crazy. And they're still out there fishing, nothing's changed.

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